

Roll Call

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By Alison McSherry

Two things are evident after one spends time in the office of Rep. Bruce Braley (D-Iowa): The second-term Congressman does not shy away from hard work, and he has a deep love for baseball.

Braley represents a district that both manufactures the steel bollards that protect the entranceways to federal buildings and is home to the legendary Field of Dreams, created for the 1989 baseball film. As a result, his space in the Longworth House Office Building is decorated with mementos that pay homage to working hard and playing hard.

"My office is a reflection of who I am, my family and the people I want to remember while I'm here in Washington," Braley says.

Among the framed photos of his children and the Iowa landscape is perhaps the most emotionally powerful object in Braley's office: a pair of worn-out work boots. The Congressman spent his summers during college working for the Poweshiek County roads department, where he performed hard labor in the hot sun. Upon admission to law school at the University of Iowa, Braley swore he would never work for the roads department again and destroyed the boots he wore to work.

"I doused them in gasoline and I lit a match and I threw it on them, thinking I would never need those work boots again," Braley says.

Little did he know that tragedy would strike during his first year. In a three-month period, he lost his father and two grandparents. Braley returned home after their deaths to help his mother through the heartache. Forced to take a job with the roads department to make ends meet, he needed a new pair of work boots. He has kept the boots ever since.

"I've never gotten rid of them because they are a symbol to me of how life is unpredictable," he says.

When Braley first ran for office in 2006, he promised the people of Iowa that if elected, he would wear his old work boots into the House chamber to vote on the Employee Free Choice Act, which would revamp union-organizing laws. Braley made good on the promise, as is clearly seen in a photo of him standing on the Capitol steps in the boots.

The boots are not the only personal touches. Braley's personal office is peppered with baseball memorabilia - including a blue "Field of Dreams" hat - and mementos from his time spent playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers, his Little League team (Braley grew up in Brooklyn, Iowa). A black-and-white photo of a dozen or so young kids in uniform hangs beside his desk; "68 champs" is scrawled across the top.

"When I was growing up, my hero was Sandy Koufax," he says, referring to the former Dodgers' pitcher. "And even though Los Angeles is a long ways from Iowa, I became a lifetime Dodgers fan."

In addition to the photo, Braley also keeps his old mitt on a shelf in his office. The mitt is worn from age and use, though it still fits on the 52-year-old Congressman's hand.

"One of the reasons I keep this glove is because it's so different. I mean, I wore this glove all the way through high school and yet the gloves today would be half as long," he says.

Inside the glove is a baseball caked in dirt. A few years back, the Iowa town of Anamosa was devastated by flooding and the high school's baseball team, the Blue Raiders, was unable to use its field for a full season.

"I went over their diamond in a boat that was about 5 to 10 feet above the diamond," Braley says.

Braley wore the team's jersey in the annual Roll Call Congressional Baseball Game last year as a nod to the team's struggle. Prior to the game, the Congressman paid a visit to the Blue Raiders and participated in one of their practices.

"They gave me this baseball, and I kept it as a memento," Braley says. "We had a great time together, and that's another one of the fun things about serving in Congress."

When he's not busy legislating, Braley nurtures his love of the game by attending Washington Nationals and Baltimore Orioles games. He also plans to once again play for the Democrats in the Congressional game.

"If I don't suffer any injuries before the game, I look forward to playing in my fourth consecutive game," he says. "We're on a roll - we have a one-game winning streak."